Supreme Court, U.S.
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No. _____ OFFICE OF THE CLERK

IN THE
Supreme Court of the United States

NELDON JOHNSON,

Petitioner,

v.

INA JOHNSON,

Respondent.

On Petition for Writ of Certiorari to the Supreme Court of the State of Utah

PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED FOR REVIEW:

I. Whether the Utah Supreme Court's decision in *Johnson v. Johnson*, holding any court of general jurisdiction has jurisdiction over parties who sue in divorce even if no marriage existed, violates federal law when this Court has announced federal courts lack jurisdiction over divorce cases?

II. Whether the Utah Supreme Court's decision violates the full faith and credit clause of the U.S. Constitution and the Defense of Marriage Act when the Utah Supreme Court found the district court has jurisdiction to grant a divorce in the case of an illegal marriage?

LIST OF ALL PARTIES

The parties to this matter include Neldon Johnson and Ina Johnson.

CORPORATE DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

This appeal is not made by or in behalf of any corporation. Therefore, there is no parent or publicly held company owning 10% or more of the corporation's stock relevant to this matter.

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CITATIONS OF THE OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL REPORTS OF THE OPINIONS AND ORDERS ENTERED IN THIS CASE

The decision by the Utah Supreme Court of May 7, 2010, is reported as *Johnson v. Johnson*, 2010 UT 28, 234 P.3d 1100, and is included as Appendix A hereto.

The order by the Utah State District Court for the Fourth District, Provo Department, of February 28, 2008, is unreported and is included as Appendix B hereto.

The order by the Utah Supreme Court of June 28, 2010, is unreported and is included as Appendix C hereto.

Neldon Johnson, Petitioner, for his petition for certiorari states:

STATEMENT OF JURISDICTION

(i) The date the judgment or order sought to be reviewed was entered.

The Utah Supreme Court issued a written opinion on May 7, 2010, under the citation *Johnson v. Johnson*, 2010 UT 28, 234 P.3d 1100. A copy of the opinion is attached as Appendix A.

Neldon Johnson filed a Petition for Rehearing on May 21, 2010. The Utah Supreme Court denied the Petition for Rehearing on June 28, 2010 in a written order. A copy of the order is attached as Appendix C

(ii) Statutory provision allowing appeal.

28 U.S.C. § 1257(a) provides jurisdiction to appeal this matter to the United States Supreme Court.

APPLICABLE CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS, TREATIES, STATUTES, ORDINANCES, AND REGULATIONS

28 U.S.C. § 1257(a) (2010).

(a) Final judgments or decree rendered by the highest court of a State in which a decision could be had, may be reviewed by the Supreme Court by writ of certiorari where the validity of a treaty or statute of the United States is drawn in question or whether the validity of a statute of any State is drawn in question

on the ground of its being repugnant to the Constitution, treaties, or laws of the United States, or where any title, right, privilege, or immunity is specially set up or claimed under the Constitution or the treaties or statutes of, or any commission held or authority exercised under, the United States.

U.S. Constitution, Art. IV, § 1.

Full faith and credit shall be given in each state to the public acts, records, and judicial proceedings of every other state. And the congress may by general laws prescribe the manner in which such acts, records and proceedings shall be proved, and the effect thereof.

28 U.S.C. § 1738C (2010).

No State, territory, or possession of the United States, or Indian tribe, shall be required to give effect to any public act, record, or judicial proceeding of any other State, territory, possession, or tribe respecting a relationship between persons of the same sex that is treated as a marriage under the laws of such other State, territory, possession, or tribe, or a right or claim arising from such relationship.

Utah Constitution, Art. I, § 29.

(1) Marriage consists only of the legal union between a man and a woman.

(2) No other domestic union, however denominated, may be recognized as a marriage or given the same or substantially equivalent legal effect.

Utah Code Ann. § 30-1-4.5 (2004).

(1) A marriage which is not solemnized according to this chapter shall be legal and valid if a court or administrative order establishes that it arises out of a contract between a man and a woman who:

(a) are of legal age and capable of giving consent;

(b) are legally capable of entering a solemnized marriage under the provisions of this chapter;

(c) have cohabited;

(d) mutually assume marital rights, duties, and obligations; and

(e) who hold themselves out as and have acquired a uniform and general reputation as husband and wife.

(2) The determination or establishment of a marriage under this section must occur during the relationship described in Subsection (1), or within one year following the termination of that relationship. Evidence of a marriage recognizable under this section may be manifested in any form, and may be proved under the same general rules of evidence as facts in other cases.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

Neldon Johnson ("Mr. Johnson") asks this Court to reverse the Utah Supreme Court's decision, finding the Fourth District Court of Utah ("District Court") had jurisdiction to grant a divorce after making an express finding that there was no legal marriage. *Johnson v. Johnson*, 2010 UT 28, ¶¶ 3, 4. *Johnson* involves a divorce between Appellant, Mr. Johnson, and Appellee, Ms. Johnson who were not legally married and whose marriage was illegal at the time because Ms. Johnson was underage. Despite an illegal union, the Utah Supreme Court found the District Court had subject matter jurisdiction to grant a divorce. *Id.*, at ¶ 1.

The Utah Supreme Court affirmed denial of a Rule 60(b) Motion to Vacate the Divorce Decree filed by Mr. Johnson, in which he argued the District Court did not have subject matter jurisdiction to divorce an unmarried couple. *Id.* The District Court decided Mr. Johnson was estopped from challenging subject matter jurisdiction because of the timeliness of his Motion to Vacate. *See* Appendix B. On appeal, the Utah Supreme Court rejected estoppel and instead concluded the District Court had subject matter jurisdiction "because courts of general jurisdiction have the authority to adjudicate a divorce claim." *Id.*, at ¶ 12. This decision was unconstitutional and should be reversed.

I. Facts.

On or about May 3, 1964, Mr. and Ms. Johnson set out for Mexico to elope. On the day of the alleged marriage, Ms. Johnson was only 15 years old and could

not legally marry in Utah. On the way to Mexico, Mr. Johnson's vehicle broke down near Hatch, Utah. The parties stayed in Hatch to await repairs. The parties never made it to Mexico nor did they ever marry. They agreed to return home and tell everyone they were married in Arizona. The parties were never married at any time. The parties never received a marriage license from any jurisdiction.

One year later, on or after May 3, 1965, Mr. and Ms. Johnson participated in a Mormon religious ceremony which presumed they were previously legally and lawfully married. No marriage license was procured for the ceremony and the "marriage" was not solemnized.

Over the ensuing years, on two different occasions, Mr. Johnson asked Ms. Johnson to legally marry him. Ms. Johnson refused on both occasions. On the first occasion, in or about the early 1990s, in Las Vegas, Nevada, Mr. Johnson asked Ms. Johnson to marry him. Ms. Johnson said she did not want to get married. On the second occasion, in or about the late 1990s, after Mr. and Ms. Johnson watched the movie *Runaway Bride*, Mr. Johnson again asked Ms. Johnson to marry him. Ms. Johnson again said she did not want to get married because she did not think the relationship would last much longer.

Mr. and Ms. Johnson pretended to live as husband and wife for approximately 35 years. On or about July 20, 2000, Ms. Johnson filed for divorce. In answering the petition for divorce, Mr. Johnson believed time alone established a common law marriage. Mr. Johnson did not think to plead the parties were never

married or that Ms. Johnson was only 15 years old when they began cohabiting.

On or about May 29, 2001, Mr. and Ms. Johnson entered into a stipulation to bifurcate the divorce action. On or about June 6, 2001, the District Court entered the Decree of Divorce and Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law. On or about June 27, 2001, the Court entered the Amended Decree of Divorce. The Amended Decree of Divorce and Amended Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law incorporated a stipulation between the parties to the terms of the divorce.

On September 18, 2007, Mr. Johnson filed a Motion to Vacate the Decree of Divorce and Amended Decree of Divorce and Motion to Dismiss for Want of Subject Matter Jurisdiction Pursuant to Utah R. Civ. P. 12(b)(1), 12(h), and 60(b)(4). Mr. Johnson had recently learned the parties did not have a common law marriage because the "marriage" was never properly solemnized as required by Utah law and the marriage was void because Ms. Johnson was only 15 years old when the "marriage" was to have occurred.

Mr. Johnson argued the District Court did not have jurisdiction to enter a divorce because there was no marriage between the parties. The District Court denied Mr. Johnson's motion, finding Mr. Johnson was estopped from challenging subject matter jurisdiction because of the timeliness of his Motion to Vacate. Mr. Johnson appealed to the Utah Supreme Court.

The Utah Supreme Court heard oral argument on the matter. The Utah Supreme Court affirmed the District Court, ignoring estoppel and instead

concluding the District Court had subject matter jurisdiction over the divorce "because courts of general jurisdiction have the authority to adjudicate a divorce claim." *Johnson*, 2010 UT at ¶ 12. The Utah Supreme Court held because the District Court has jurisdiction over divorces, it has subject matter jurisdiction to determine the rights of parties who sue in divorce. *Id.* at ¶7.

ARGUMENT

The United States Supreme Court has jurisdiction under § 1257(a) to review "[f]inal judgments or decrees rendered by" the Utah Supreme Court. *Johnson v. California*, 541 U.S. 428, 429 (2004). This Court should grant certiorari to correct the Utah Supreme Court's decision in *Johnson v. Johnson*, which held Utah courts of general jurisdiction have subject matter jurisdiction over divorce cases even if no legal marriage existed.

The Utah Supreme Court's decision violates the Utah Constitution, the full faith and credit clause of the United States Constitution, and the Defense of Marriage Act ("DOMA"). The *Johnson* decision removes the jurisdictional prerequisite of marriage from divorce cases, a prerequisite traditionally acknowledged in Utah and by almost all states. This decision seemingly grants subject matter jurisdiction to courts to hear divorce cases which, before *Johnson,* would have lacked subject matter jurisdiction, so long as other statutory jurisdiction requirements are met (i.e., Federal District Courts situated in Utah where diversity exists and amount in controversy is met may now hear and decide divorces).

The *Johnson* case emasculates strict legislative requirements for common law marriage by allowing a party who fails to qualify under statutory common law marriage guidelines to obtain a divorce nonetheless. This decision inadvertently provides justification to parties to ignore all statutory marriage requirements.

Finally, this decision allows a court to grant those who have any form of domestic partnership arrangement, whether legal or illegal, recognized or unrecognized, to obtain a divorce because marriage is no longer required in Utah for a divorce. Therefore, certiorari is appropriate.

I. The Utah Supreme Court's ruling is unconstitutional because it gives illegal marriages the same or substantially equivalent legal effect as legal marriages, a result contrary to Utah's Constitution.

Article I, Section 29 of the Utah Constitution states:

> (1) Marriage consists only of the legal union between a man and a woman.
>
> (2) **No other domestic union, however denominated, may be recognized as a marriage or given the same or substantially equivalent legal effect**.

Utah Const. Art. I, § 29 (2009) (emphasis added).

Under Utah's Constitution, the only marriage recognized is a "legal union between a man and a woman." *Id.* All parties in this matter, and the Utah Supreme Court, recognize there was no "legal union between a man and a woman" in this case. *Johnson*, at ¶¶ 3, 4. Nevertheless, the holding in *Johnson* in part states, "...[because] courts of general jurisdiction have the authority to adjudicate divorces, we will not invalidate a divorce decree on the grounds that 'the right involved in the suit did not embrace the relief granted." *Johnson*, 2010 UT at ¶ 12.

This holding violates the Utah State Constitution by creating a mechanism whereby parties not lawfully married may enjoy the legal effects of a valid marriage by receiving a divorce decree from Utah courts. By holding the unmarried parties in *Johnson* were eligible for a divorce decree, the Utah Supreme Court has paved the way for others similarly situated to seek remedial relief previously reserved by Utah's Constitution only to lawfully married couples. Consequently, the Utah Supreme Court is now affording the same or substantially equivalent legal effect to a non-married couple by enforcing this unmarried couple's divorce decree, thereby contravening unambiguous constitutional provisions to the contrary.

The Utah Supreme Court's holding relies upon general jurisdiction to negate the special protections afforded to a marriage contract alone. *See* Utah Code Ann. § 30-3-1(2) (1997). A marriage contract can only exist where there has been a legal union between a man and a woman. *See* Utah Const., Art. I, § 29.

Without a legal union, the marriage contract would necessarily be void for illegality.

The District Court obtains subject matter jurisdiction to dissolve a marriage only where a legal union exists. To hold a District Court automatically has subject matter jurisdiction to grant divorces when parties are not legally married is to give courts automatic subject matter jurisdiction to grant a divorce under *any* circumstance.

The Utah Supreme Court's holding directly violates the Utah Constitution by now giving the District Courts subject matter jurisdiction to grant a divorce (and thereby legalize a marriage) whenever there is an illegal marriage applying for divorce in Utah. There is no difference between the illegal union in this case and the illegal unions between same sex couples, or other cases involving minors, or where there are multiple wives or husbands, or under any number of heretofore illegal domestic arrangements. There is no difference between an illegal marriage because the parties were ineligible to marry due to age (as here), or an illegal marriage because of other issues including all of the above. No marital defect now prevents divorce in Utah. The holding is in error by conferring marital rights upon illegal unions in violation of Utah's Constitution and should be reversed.

II. The Utah Supreme Court's decision eliminates the need for subject matter jurisdiction in order for a United States District Court in Utah to hear a case.

"Subject matter jurisdiction defines the court's authority to hear a given type of case." *United States v. Morton*, 467 U.S. 822, 828 (1984). "It represents 'the extent to which a court can rule on the conduct of persons or the status of things.'" *Carlsbad Technology, Inc. v. HIF Bio, Inc.*, ___ U.S. ___, 129 S.Ct. 1862, *4 (2009) (*quoting* Black's Law Dictionary 870 (8th ed. 2004)). However, "[t]his Court's precedent makes clear that whether a court has subject matter jurisdiction over a claim is distinct from whether a court chooses to exercise that jurisdiction." *Id.*

Utah law used to be in accord. *See Chen v. Stewart*, 2004 UT 82, ¶ 38, 100 P.3d 1177 (subject matter jurisdiction "is the authority of the court to decide the case"). However, under the *Johnson* decision, subject matter is no longer required for a US District Court to hear a case.

> In *Johnson*, the Utah Supreme Court stated:
> Just as a court adjudicating a contract dispute has the authority to determine that no contract exists without losing subject matter jurisdiction over the dispute, a court has the authority to adjudicate a divorce claim even if the court later determines that no marriage ever existed. We therefore overrule our holding in *Caffall* and hold that because courts of general jurisdiction have the authority to adjudicate divorces, we will not invalidate a

> divorce decree on the grounds that the 'right involved in the suit did not embrace the relief granted.'

Johnson, 2010 UT at ¶ 12 (*citing Perry v. McLaughlin*, 754 P.2d 679, 682 (Utah App. 1988)).

This decision permits any court, including a US District Court, to grant a divorce, even if there was no marriage. The *Johnson* decision is over-reaching. *See Chen*, 2004 UT at ¶ 38 (*quoting* Utah Code Ann. § 78-3-4 (2003)). Granting certiorari will allow this Court to clarify the misconceptions about subject matter jurisdiction in US District Courts of general jurisdiction.

III. Whether the Utah Supreme Court's decision in *Johnson v. Johnson* violates federal law when this Court has announced federal courts lack jurisdiction over divorce cases.

The domestic-relations exception to federal court jurisdiction is a judicially created exception to Congress' grant of diversity-based subject matter jurisdiction on the federal district courts. *Martinez v. Martinez*, No. CIV 09-0281, *9 (N.M. 3-30-2010). The Supreme Court of the United States has recognized that, in a highly circumscribed category of "domestic-relations" cases, federal district courts lack jurisdiction even when there is complete diversity between the parties. *Id.* It is known as the domestic-relations exception. *See Ankenbrandt v. Richards*, 504 U.S. 687 (1992)

The exception grew from *dicta* in the 1858 Supreme Court case of *Barber v. Barber*, 62 U.S. 582 (1858), where this Court stated:

> We disclaim altogether any jurisdiction in the courts of the United States upon the subject of divorce, or for the allowance of alimony, either as an original proceeding in chancery or as an incident to divorce a vinculo, or to one from bed and board.

62 U.S. at 584.

In *Ankenbrandt v. Richards*, 504 U.S. 687, this Court recognized that the statement in *Barber*, *supra*, "disclaiming jurisdiction over divorce and alimony decree suits, though technically dicta, formed the basis for excluding 'domestic relations' cases from the jurisdiction of the lower federal courts, a jurisdictional limitation those courts have recognized ever since." 504 U.S. at 694. This Court then concluded "the domestic relations exception, as articulated by this Court since *Barber*, divests the federal courts of power to issue divorce, alimony, and child custody decrees." *Id.*, at 703.

The Tenth Circuit concisely phrased the various rationales for the rule:

> (1) the states have a strong interest in domestic relations matters and have developed an expertise in settling family disputes; (2) such disputes often require ongoing supervision, a task for which the federal courts are not suited; (3) federal adjudication of such disputes

> increases the chances of incompatible or duplicative federal and state court decrees; and (4) such cases serve no particular federal interest, while they crowd the federal court docket.

Vaughan v. Smithson, 883 F.2d 63, 65 (10th Cir. 1989) (*citing Rykers v. Alford*, 832 F.2d 895, 899-900 (5th Cir. 1987), and *Ruffalo v. Civiletti*, 702 F.2d 710, 717 (8th Cir. 1983)).

In *Elk Grove Unified Sch. Dist. v. Newdow*, this Court stated: "So strong is our deference to state law in [the area of domestic relations] that we have recognized a 'domestic relations exception' that 'divests the federal courts of power to issue divorce, alimony, and child custody decrees,'" unless a rare instance arises in which it is "necessary to answer a substantial federal question that transcends or exists apart from the family law issue." 542 U.S. 1, 12-13 (2004) (internal citations omitted).

In discussing the breadth of the exception, the Supreme Court stated:

> In the more than 100 years since this Court laid the seeds for the development of the domestic relations exception, the lower federal courts have applied it in a variety of circumstances. Many of these applications go well beyond the circumscribed situations posed by *Barber* and its progeny.

Ankenbrandt, 504 U.S. at 701. However, this Court narrowed the exception in 2006, stating "the exception

covers only 'a narrow range of domestic relations issues.'" *Marshall v. Marshall*, 547 U.S. 293, 307 (2006). "[O]nly 'divorce, alimony, and child custody decrees' remain outside federal jurisdictional bounds." *Id.* at 308.

The Utah Supreme Court's decision in *Johnson* contravenes the domestic-relations exception because the holding allows for any court of general jurisdiction, whether state or federal, to adjudicate divorce issues. *Johnson*, 2010 UT at ¶ 12. The holding makes no distinction between state and federal courts.

The holding leaves open to any court with jurisdiction over civil matters to grant divorces, including a U.S. District Court so long as the case involves diversity of citizenship and more than $75,000 in controversy. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 1332 (2010). Additionally, there is no reason why a state small claims court could not grant a divorce where the marital estate is less than jurisdictional limits of the small claims court. This holding directly conflicts with *Ankenbrandt* and its progeny. Therefore, a grant of certiorari is appropriate.

IV. The *Johnson* Decision improperly extends the scope of divorce and contravenes the Defense of Marriage Act and Article IV of the U.S. Constitution.

This Court has recognized that marriage is a "fundamental human relationship" *Boddie v. Connecticut*, 401 U.S. 371, 383 (1971) and "involves interests of basic importance in our society." *Id.* at 376. This Court continued: it is "unaware of any jurisdiction where private citizens may covenant for or dissolve marriages without state approval" because marriage is in the exclusive control of each state. *Id.* at 376.

Notwithstanding the prime importance of marriage in society, the Utah Supreme Court's decision in *Johnson* improperly extends the scope of divorce and contravenes the Defense of Marriage Act and the Fourteenth Amendment.

A. The *Johnson* decision improperly extends the scope of divorce and contravenes public policy because it no longer makes "marriage" a requirement to obtain a divorce.

The Utah Supreme Court's new rule that "[t]he district court has jurisdiction over divorces and thus has jurisdiction to determine the rights of parties who sue in divorce" violates public policy. *Johnson v. Johnson*, 2010 UT 28,¶¶ 7-13. A valid marriage has always been the prerequisite for jurisdiction in a divorce action in Utah. *See, e.g.*, *Barton v. Barton*, 29 P.3d 13 (Utah App. 2001); *Van Der Stappen v. Van*

Der Stappen, 815 P.2d 1335 (Utah App. 1991). The requirement of a valid marriage is a jurisdictional requirement in almost all states. *See, e.g., Crane v. Taliaferro*, 2009 Ark. App. 336, 308 S.W.3d 648; *Stark v. Ratashara*, 177 N.C. App. 449 (2006); *Blocker v. Blocker*, 885 So.2d 796 (Ala. Civ. App.2004); *Cannon v. Cannon*, 677 N.E.2d 566 (Ind. App. 1997); *In Re Marriage of Brown*, 878 S.W.2d 94 (Mo. App. E.D. 1994); *Lowenschuss v. Lowenschuss*, 579 A.2d 377 (Pa. Sup. Ct. 1990).

The institution of marriage is at risk in Utah because its courts have said a legal marriage is irrelevant in deciding how to dissolve any cohabitation. In Utah, whether or not the parties seeking a divorce have a valid marriage, they may obtain a divorce from the District Court solely because of its powers of general jurisdiction to grant a divorce. This affects every state of the union.

The *Johnson* case will not be limited in affect to divorce proceedings, but will inevitably extend to health benefits, rights of survivorship, inheritance, etc. Federal funds and National programs will be directly affected by the economic results of this unanchored decision. The decision places no limits on who may sue for divorce or under what circumstances a divorce will be granted.

In *Black's Law Dictionary* 515 (8th ed. 2004), "divorce" is defined as "[t]he legal dissolution of a marriage by a court." However, the Utah Supreme Court's decision does not require parties to be married to grant a divorce. This decision extends the scope of divorce, allowing a party to sue for divorce in bigamous

relationships, in a relationship with an underage party, in an unrecognized co-habitation relationship, or in a same-sex relationship, such as a domestic partnership or same-sex marriage, because "the district court has jurisdiction to determine the rights of the parties who sue in divorce." *Johnson*, 2010 UT at ¶7. In none of these scenarios is there a valid marriage, yet the parties may now sue for divorce in Utah with the potential for mischief under other legal rights or programs.

The Utah Supreme Court has adopted a brave new approach of granting parties to invalid and illegal marriages the right to a divorce decree. Without the Utah Legislature's involvement in debating or controlling the process, and in derogation of the Legislative mandate limiting common law marriages, now in Utah a marriage is irrelevant to divorce. This is error. Therefore, a grant of certiorari is appropriate.

B. The *Johnson* decision contravenes the Defense of Marriage Act and Article IV of the U.S. Constitution because it requires other states to give full faith and credit to Utah divorce decrees that violate their own laws.

Article IV of the United States Constitution states "Full Faith and Credit shall be given in each State to the public Acts, Records, and judicial Proceedings of every other State." U.S. Const., Art. IV, Sec. 1. However, Congress has adopted the Defense of Marriage Act, in which Congress determined that, though each state must recognize the proceedings of

another state, "No State ... of the United States ... shall be required to give effect to any ... judicial proceeding of any other State ... respecting a relationship between persons of the same sex that is treated as a marriage under the law of such other State...." 28 U.S.C. § 1738C.

The breadth of the decision by the Utah Supreme Court now risks requiring other states to recognize Utah's divorce of a same sex couple, violating the DOMA and the full faith and credit clause. *Johnson* is over-reaching and destructive to the sanctity of marriage in this country. It permits Utah courts to hear and determine divorce actions where there is no legally recognizable marriage in any state.

Now, states may not recognize same-sex marriage but will be required to recognize the divorce decree and rights provided for therein which is granted in Utah to a same-sex couple. The fact that a decree can be domesticated in any state, and must be recognized under the full faith and credit clause, requires every state to recognize the divorce of a same-sex couple. Other states are required to uphold and enforce divorce decrees when no marriage existed, in violation of their own laws governing marriage and divorce. Such an outcome implicates the Constitution and the laws of this country. Therefore, certiorari is appropriate to correct the errors of the Utah Supreme Court.

V. By focusing on subject matter jurisdiction, an issue that neither party briefed, the Utah Supreme Court failed to foresee the problematic repercussions implicit in its holding.

The Utah Supreme Court's decision in *Johnson* is so broad it creates many problematic repercussions, relating to jurisdiction, separation of powers, and administrative exhaustion.

A. The *Johnson* Decision Removes the Need for a Common Law Marriage Statute, and Ignores the Lawmaking Authority of the Utah State Legislature.

The State of Utah recognizes only two forms of marriage contracts, those that are solemnized by a properly authorized authority, *see* Utah Code. Ann. § 30-1-6, and those that obtain an appropriate order of the court to establish a statutory "common law" marriage. *See* Utah Code Ann. § 30-1-4.5. Utah did not have a common law marriage until 1987 when the Utah Legislature adopted a statute to permit it. *Mattes v. Olearain*, 759 P.2d 1177, n. 2 (Utah App. 1988).

The Utah Legislature established strict limits upon such a marriage, and the Johnsons did not meet the requirements. They neither attempted to recognize a common law marriage during their marriage, nor within one year of the termination of the relationship, as is required by the statute. *Id.* The Utah statute provides the following procedure for qualifying an unsolemnized marriage:

(1) A marriage which is not solemnized according to this chapter shall be legal and valid if a court or administrative order establishes that it arises out of a contract between a man and a woman who:

(a) are of legal age and capable of giving consent;

(b) are legally capable of entering a solemnized marriage under the provisions of this chapter;

(c) have cohabited;

(d) mutually assume marital rights, duties, and obligations; and

(e) who hold themselves out as and have acquired a uniform and general reputation as husband and wife.

(2) **The determination or establishment of a marriage under this section must occur during the relationship described in Subsection (1), or within one year following the termination of that relationship**. Evidence of a marriage recognizable under this section may be manifested in any form, and may be proved under the same general rules of evidence as facts in other cases.

Utah Code Ann. § 30-1-4.5 (emphasis added).

In *Johnson*, neither party applied under subsection (2) within one year to establish the marriage. This time requirement is a statute of repose, which can not be extended by the mistake or ignorance of the parties. In *In Re Marriage of Kunz,* 2006 UT App 151, 136 P.3d 1278, 1283-84, the Utah Court of Appeals decided Utah Code Ann. § 30-1-4.5(2) was a statute of repose. The *Kunz* case states in relevant part as follows:

> ¶ 16 . . . Lillie and Lynne further argue that section 30-1-4.5(2) is a statute of repose, rather than a statute of limitations, and therefore, it cannot be tolled by the discovery rule. See *Perry v. Pioneer Wholesale Supply Co.*, 681 P.2d 214, 219 (Utah 1984) ("A statute of repose generally 'set[s] a designated event for the statutory period to start running and then provide[s] that at the expiration of the period any cause of action is barred regardless of usual reasons for "tolling" the statute.'" (alterations in original) (quoting Restatement (Second) of Torts § 899 cmt. g (1979))). ... The time limit of section 30-1-4.5 runs from the occurrence of a specific event — the termination of the relationship, see id. — and is not related to any injury or legal right. Therefore, we agree with Lillie and Lynne that the one-year time limit of section 30-1-4.5(2) acts as a statute of repose. Consequently, we hold that the discovery rule cannot operate to toll the one-year limit of section 30-1-4.5(2)."

Id., at 1283-84.

Therefore, Utah law had no mechanism for recognizing a common law marriage terminated more than a year past, until *Johnson*. Now the Utah Supreme Court has established by judicial fiat a new mechanism separate from the legislative mandate, which permit a divorce even when the parties have failed to comply with the requirements to solemnize a legal union, and neglected to comply with the strict statutory requirements for the establishment of a common law marriage.

The decision in *Johnson* essentially replaces the Utah Legislature as the body controlling the policy over common law marriage. Unlike the statute, now by virtue of the divorce remedy becoming available to anyone even if unmarried, the Legislature has lost any control.

B. Parties No Longer Need Exhaust Administrative Remedies.

As the Utah Supreme Court recognized, though District Courts have the general jurisdiction to adjudicate a matter of administrative law **after** they have exhausted their administrative remedies, they do not obtain that jurisdiction until after the prerequisite administrative remedies have been exhausted. *See Housing Auth. v. Snyder*, 2002 UT 28, ¶¶ 9, 11, 44 P.3d 724. The effect of the Utah Supreme Court's holding in *Johnson* is to ignore such prerequisites.

CONCLUSION

Based on the foregoing, Petitioner, Neldon Johnson, respectfully requests this Court accept his Petition and grant Certiorari to review the issues affecting his rights.

Respectfully Submitted.

Denver C. Snuffer, Jr.
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September 24, 2010

APPENDIX

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APPENDIX A

INA JOHNSON v. JOHNSON, 2010 UT 28

Ina Marie Johnson, Petitioner and Appellee, v.
Neldon Paul Johnson,
Respondent and Appellant.
No. 20080274.
Supreme Court of Utah.
May 7, 2010.

Fourth District, Provo Dep't, The Honorable Steven L. Hansen, No. 004401468.

On Certification from the Utah Court of Appeals.

Denver C. Snuffer, Jr., Robert D. Dahle, Sandy, for petitioner.
Rosemond G. Blakelock, Provo, for respondent.

PARRISH, Justice:

INTRODUCTION

¶ 1 Defendant Neldon Johnson appeals the district court's denial of his motion to vacate his divorce decree for lack of subject matter jurisdiction. The district court concluded that the court that granted the divorce decree terminating the marriage of Neldon and Ina Johnson lacked subject matter jurisdiction because the parties were never legally married. It nevertheless judicially estopped Mr. Johnson from asserting lack of subject matter jurisdiction because he had admitted

the existence of the marriage in the original divorce proceeding thereby preventing Ms. Johnson from initiating a timely action to establish a statutory marriage under Utah Code section 30-1-4.5 (2007). Because we hold that the original court did in fact have subject matter jurisdiction, we affirm the dismissal of Mr. Johnson's 60(b) motion to vacate the divorce decree.

FACTUAL & PROCEDURAL BACKGROUND

¶ 2 The Utah Fourth District Court granted a divorce decree ending the marriage of Neldon and Ina Johnson in June 2001. At that time, the parties stipulated to a $2,800,000 property settlement, which required Mr. Johnson to pay Ms. Johnson $8,333.33 a month, secured by a note and trust deed on Mr. Johnson's company's real and personal property and inventory. Except for a $25,000 court ordered penalty, Mr. Johnson has paid Ms. Johnson nothing under the property settlement. Mr. Johnson has filed many challenges to the divorce decree since stipulating to it, all of which have been denied. These challenges were made as collateral attacks to the divorce decree rather than appeals from it.

¶ 3 In September 2007, Mr. Johnson filed a Motion to Vacate the Decree and Amended Decree of Divorce under Utah Rule of Civil Procedure 60(b) on the grounds that the district court lacked subject matter jurisdiction to adjudicate the divorce as the parties were never legally married, a fact that neither party now denies. Mr. Johnson now appeals the district court's ruling denying the motion to vacate.

¶ 4 When Ms. Johnson filed for divorce, her complaint alleged that the parties had been married on May 3, 1964. Mr. Johnson admitted in his answer that this was true. In reality, however, although the parties had intended to get married on May 3, 1964, car troubles prevented them from carrying out their plan. Instead, the Johnsons spent several days away and when they returned, they told their friends and family that they had married, even though no actual marriage ceremony had taken place. Approximately one year later, Mr. and Ms. Johnson were married in a religious ceremony, but never took steps to have their marriage legally recognized.

¶ 5 The district court denied Mr. Johnson's motion to vacate. Although the court found that the parties were never married and held that the court that issued the divorce decree lacked subject matter jurisdiction, it denied the motion to vacate on the basis that judicial estoppel prevented Mr. Johnson from raising the parties' lack of marriage so long after the issuance of the original decree. We conclude that the original district court had subject matter jurisdiction to grant the divorce decree and therefore affirm. We have jurisdiction [1102] over this matter pursuant to Utah Code section 78A-3-102(3)(j) (2008).

STANDARD OF REVIEW

¶ 6 "A denial of a motion to vacate a judgment under rule 60(b) is ordinarily reversed only for an abuse of discretion." Dep't of Social Servs. v. Vijil, 784 P.2d 1130, 1132 (Utah 1989). However "the propriety of [a] jurisdictional determination, and hence the decision not to vacate, becomes a question of law upon

which we do not defer to the district court." Id. Thus, the district court's decision to deny Mr. Johnson's motion to vacate on the basis of a lack of subject matter jurisdiction is a question of law, and we accordingly afford no discretion to that decision. See id.

ANALYSIS

THE DISTRICT COURT HAS JURISDICTION OVER DIVORCES AND THUS HAS SUBJECT MATTER JURISDICTION TO DETERMINE THE RIGHTS OF PARTIES WHO SUE IN DIVORCE

¶ 7 The original district court had the authority to determine whether Mr. and Mrs. Johnson met the statutory grounds for divorce and thus had subject matter jurisdiction over their divorce proceedings. In Caffall v. Caffall, we determined that a court issuing a divorce decree for a marriage later found to be void did not have subject matter jurisdiction to do so because no marriage existed. 303 P.2d 286, 288 (Utah 1956). We now conclude that this reasoning erroneously expanded the meaning of subject matter jurisdiction and accordingly overrule Caffall.

¶ 8 "Subject matter jurisdiction . . . is the authority of the court to decide the case." Chen v. Stewart, 2004 UT 82, ¶ 38, 100 P.3d 1177. "The district court has original jurisdiction in all matters civil and criminal, not excepted in the Utah Constitution and not prohibited by law." Id. (quoting Utah Code Ann. § 78-3-4 (2003)). Usually, "in order to challenge subject matter jurisdiction, [a party is] required to challenge the authority of the court to hear the underlying case." Id.

¶ 9 The concept of subject matter jurisdiction does not embrace all cases where the court's competence is at issue. "Where the court has jurisdiction over the class of case involved, judgment is not void on the ground that the right involved in the suit did not embrace the relief granted." Perry v. McLaughlin, 754 P.2d 679, 682 (Utah Ct. App. 1988). Rather, the concept of subject matter jurisdiction relates to "the relationship between the claim and the forum that allows for the exercise of jurisdiction." Chen, 2004 UT 82, ¶ 35. Instances where a court lacks subject matter jurisdiction include when a federal court is asked to adjudicate matters of state law with no diversity of citizenship, Stephens v. Wal-mart Stores, 2010 U.S. Dist. Lexis 35506, *4 (M.D. Ga. 2010); when a state court is asked to adjudicate a matter of administrative law when the parties have not exhausted their administrative remedies, Housing Auth. v. Snyder, 2002 UT 28, ¶¶ 9, 11, 44 P.3d 724; or when the statute permitting a party to sue another party requires statutory compliance, as with notice of claim requirements for suit against governmental entities, Thomas v. Lewis, 2001 UT 49, ¶ 20, 26 P.3d 217. In these instances, the court cannot adjudicate the case because it has not been given the authority to do so.

¶ 10 Because parties can raise subject matter jurisdiction at any time during a proceeding, it makes sense to cabin the issues that fall under the category of subject matter jurisdiction. See Chen, 2004 UT 82, ¶ 36 (finding that parties mischaracterized their claim as a lack of subject matter jurisdiction in order to avoid waiver); cf. State v. Norris, 2007 UT 5, ¶ 9, 152 P.3d 305 (finding that a defendant's constitutional challenge to the statute under which he was convicted did not

raise a challenge to the court's subject matter jurisdiction). For this reason, most of our cases that have addressed subject matter jurisdiction have considered the authority of the court to adjudicate a class of cases, rather than the specifics of an individual case. In Career Service Review Board v. Utah Department of Corrections, [1103] for instance, we held that the Career Service Review Board (the "Board") did not lose subject matter jurisdiction over a career service employee as a result of the factual intricacies of the case. 942 P.2d 933, 941-42 (Utah 1997). A statute clearly gave the Board jurisdiction over appeals from reprimand decisions of the department of corrections. Id. at 941. Because the Board had statutory authority to consider the appeal, we determined that the specific facts went to the merits rather than to whether the Board had subject matter jurisdiction to hear the appeal in the first place. Id. at 942. We came to a similar conclusion in Chen when we held that a challenge to the court's authority to appoint an interim CEO in the context of a company dispute did not raise an issue of subject matter jurisdiction. 2004 UT 82, ¶ 49. Rather, because the court had the authority to hear the underlying dispute, the challenge was more properly characterized as a challenge to the court's exercise of its equitable powers. Id. 50.

¶ 11 Opinions from other jurisdictions are consistent with this approach. For example, without considering subject matter jurisdiction, Texas courts have held that "a divorce judgment, unappealed, and regular on its face, is not subject to a collateral attack in a subsequent suit." Johnson v. Ventling, 132 S.W.3d 173, 178 (Tex. Ct. App. 2004) (quoting Putegnat v.

Putegnat, 706 S.W.2d 702, 703-04 (Tex. App. 1986)) (refusing to allow district court to reverse a divorce decree four years after it was entered even though the parties stipulated that they had never been married because the district court lost jurisdiction to modify the decree after the thirty-day appeals period had lapsed). And although an Ohio court has ruled that its domestic relations court lacks subject matter jurisdiction to adjudicate a divorce when there was no underlying marriage, that ruling concerned a court of special jurisdiction rather than, as is the case here, a court of general jurisdiction. Donovan v. Templeton, No. 16204, 1997 Ohio App. LEXIS 2617 at *5-8, (Ohio Ct. App., May 9, 1997). Further, while the Ohio Court of Appeals allowed the matter to be characterized as subject matter jurisdiction, it found that a lack of subject matter jurisdiction premised on "technical or procedural irregularity" is waived if not promptly raised, unlike subject matter jurisdiction concerning the court's "general authority to decide cases within a class." Id. at *7 (internal quotation marks omitted).

¶ 12 The limited definition of subject matter jurisdiction applied in other cases differs significantly from our holding in Caffall, where we held that a district court lacks subject matter jurisdiction to adjudicate a divorce if no underlying marriage exists. 303 P.2d at 288. Because the district court clearly has the authority to adjudicate divorces, looking to the specific facts of a particular case is inconsistent with our usual definition of subject matter jurisdiction. The court of appeals in Van Der Stappen v. Van Der Stappen points out that the Caffall holding is "inconsistent with the generally announced and fundamental legal proposition that 'subject matter

jurisdiction is the authority and competency of the court to decide the case,' without which, the court may not validly act." 815 P.2d 1335, 1339 n. 5 (Utah Ct. App. 1991) (quoting Dep't of Social Servs. v. Vijil, 784 P.2d 1130, 1132 (Utah 1989)). Unlike cases where a party has not exhausted its administrative remedies or has failed to comply with statutory prerequisites to suit, "[t]he discovery that the parties never had a valid marriage [does] not . . . divest the court of its authority to resolve the dispute between them." Id. at 1339 n. 8. As a result, the holding in Caffall "unnecessarily blurs the distinction between a mistake as to the exact nature of the subject matter in dispute and the court's ultimate authority and competence to decide the dispute." Id. Just as a court adjudicating a contract dispute has the authority to determine that no contract exists without losing subject matter jurisdiction over the dispute, a court has the authority to adjudicate a divorce claim even if the court later determines that no marriage ever existed. We therefore overrule our holding in Caffall and hold that because courts of general jurisdiction have the authority to adjudicate divorces, we will not invalidate a divorce decree on the grounds that the "right involved in the suit did not [1104] embrace the relief granted." See Perry, 754 P.2d at 682.

¶ 13 In this case, the district court had subject matter jurisdiction to adjudicate Ms. Johnson's petition for divorce. Because Mr. Johnson's motion to vacate the divorce decree under rule 60(b) was premised on the erroneous assumption that the original district court lacked subject matter jurisdiction to adjudicate the divorce, the motion was properly denied. Although the district court based its

denial of the 60(b) motion on other grounds, we are free to affirm the dismissal on any grounds apparent from the record. See First Equity Fed., Inc. v. Phillips Dev., LC, 2002 UT 56, ¶ 11, 52 P.3d 1137.

CONCLUSION

¶ 14 We hold that the original district court that issued the Johnsons' 2001 divorce decree did not lack subject matter jurisdiction and thus Mr. Johnson cannot collaterally attack it. We accordingly affirm the district court's denial of Mr. Johnson's rule 60(b) motion to vacate his divorce decree.

¶ 15 Chief Justice Durham, Associate Chief Justice Durrant, Justice Wilkins, and Justice Nehring concur in Justice Parrish's opinion.

APPENDIX B

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IN THE FOURTH DISTRICT COURT
OF UTAH COUNTY

STATE OF UTAH

125 North 100 West, Provo, Utah 84601

INA MARIE JOHNSON, Petitioner, vs. NELDON PAUL JOHNSON, Respondent.	ORDER DENYING MOTION TO VACATE DECREE OF DIVORCE AND AMENDED DECREE OF DIVORCE AND MOTION TO DISMISS FOR WANT OF SUBJECT MATTER JURISDICTION Case No.:004401468 Judge Steven Hansen

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This matter came on before the Court on February 4, 2008, before Judge Steven Hansen. Present was the Petitioner's counsel Rosemond Blakelock, and the Respondent's counsel, Denver Snuffer.

The Court heard the arguments of both counsel regarding the Respondent's Motion To Vacate Decree of Divorce an Amended Decree of Divorce and Motion to Dismiss for Want of Subject Matter Jurisdiction, wherein the Respondent was seeking to vacate the underlying divorce decree in this case and to dismiss the action for lack of subject matter. The Court then examined the Memorandums of both parties, the file and the contents therein and deeming itself fully informed in the premises, orders and rules as follows:

1. The Court finds that Respondent claims that the trial court did not have subject matter because the parties were never actually married.

2. The Court finds that the fact pattern in this case is not in dispute and finds that both parties admit that the parties held themselves out as being married for over 37 years, but had never actually been married. The Court finds that the Petitioner filed a Complaint for Divorce, claiming that the parties were married. The Court finds that the Respondent admitted that the parties were married and finds that neither party ever adopted any other position until the Respondent filed the Motion to Vacate now before the Court, claiming that the parties never were married.

3. The Court finds that the Respondent filed his Motion in this matter on October 19, 2007. The Petitioner responded and the Respondent then filed a

responsive brief to that of the Petitioner. The matter was then set for oral arguments before the Honorable Steven Hansen.

4. The Court finds that based upon the oral arguments and the pleadings filed in this matter that the case of Caffall v. Caffall, 5 Utah 2d 407, 303 P.22d 286, (Utah 1956) is controlling.

5. The Court finds that the Respondent has maintained the position that he was legally married to the Petitioner through the entire litigation process, until the Motion was filed on October 19, 2007 and finds that the parties held themselves out as husband and wife for nearly thirty seven years, before the Decree of Divorce was granted in this matter.

6. The Court finds that the Petitioner relied on the fact that the Respondent has held himself out as being married to the Petitioner, to her detriment. The Court finds that the Petitioner filed for divorce in the year 2000 and finds that eight years later, long after the Decree of Divorce had been granted, the Respondent filed the instant Motion.

7. The Court finds that had the Respondent filed documents claiming the parties were never married at the initiation of the case, that the Petitioner could have amended her pleadings to establish a common law marriage and would have realized the same results and outcome as are set forth in the parties Amended Decree of Divorce. The Court finds that the matter was never heard by the trial court, but was initially resolved by a mutual stipulation.

8. The Court finds that the Petitioner's act of claiming that the parties were married when she filed the Petition for Divorce, does not preclude her from relying on the final outcome in this matter, when combined with all the other facts in this particular case. The Court finds that the Respondent's claims that the Petitioner has unclean hands do not outweigh the many actions of the Respondent, over the last six years, in attempting to avoid the terms of the Amended Decree of Divorce.

9. The Court finds that an examination of the Court file in this matter demonstrates that the Respondent has a long history of acting in bad faith and further finds that this most recent Motion is yet another attempt to avoid the Respondent's financial obligations to the Petitioner, as set forth in the parties' Amended Decree of Divorce.

10. The Court finds that the elements of the Caffall v. Caffall, case have been met and finds that, as in Caffall, the Respondent/Neldon Johnson acquiesced to the divorce by entering into a stipulated agreement, which resulted in the entrance of the Amended Decree of Divorce, despite knowing that the parties were not married. The Court finds that, as in Caffall, there was a very long delay between the entry of the Amended Decree and the Respondent's Motion to set the Decree aside, which was a period of time from June 27, 2001 to October 19, 2007, which is over six years. The Court finds that Neldon Johnson filed the instant Motion to Vacate as an effort to avoid complying with the terms and obligations of the Respondent, set forth in the Amended Decree of Divorce.

11. The Court finds that the Motion to Vacate Decree of Divorce and Amended Decree of Divorce and Motion to Dismiss for Want of Subject Matter Jurisdiction filed by Neldon Johnson was another attempt to avoid the terms of the Decree of Divorce that required him to pay sums due and owing to the Petitioner. The Court finds that Neldon Johnson acts, when taken altogether, constitute bad faith.

12. For all the foregoing reasons, the Court finds that the Respondent's Motion to Vacate Decree of Divorce and Amended Decree of Divorce and Motion to Dismiss for Want of Subject Matter Jurisdiction should be denied because the Respondent is estopped from attacking the Amended Decree, despite any lack of subject matter jurisdiction.

13. The Motion to Vacate Decree of Divorce and Amended Decree of Divorce and Motion to Dismiss for Want of Subject Matter Jurisdiction is hereby denied.

SIGNED AND DATED this 22nd day of February, 2008.

By the Court

/s/ Judge Steven Hansen

NOTICE TO COUNSEL, Denver Snuffer

TO: Denver Snuffer
10885 South State Street
Sandy Utah 84070

You will please take notice that he undersigned attorney for Petitioner will submit the above and foregoing Order to the Court for signature. Pursuant to Rule 7 (f)(2) of the Utah Rules of Civil Procedure any objection as to the form of the order should be filed with the Court, within five days after service upon you of this notice.

DATED this 4th day of February, 2008

/s/ Rosemond G. Blakelock
Attorney for Petitioner

CERTIFICATE OF MAILING

On this 4th day of February 2008, I mailed a copy of the Order to Denver Snuffer at the above listed address, via first class mail.

/s/ Rosemond G. Blakelock

APPENDIX C

IN THE UTAH SUPREME COURT

---oo0oo---

Ina Marie Johnson

Petitioner and Appellee,

v.

Neldon Paul Johnson

Respondent and Appellant.

Case No. 20080274

ORDER

This matter is before the court upon Appellant's Petition for Rehearing, filed on May 21, 2010.

IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that pursuant to Rule 35 of the Utah Rules of Appellate Procedure the petition for rehearing is denied.

For The Court:

/s/ Matthew B. Durrant
Matthew B.Durrant
Associate Chief Justice

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I hereby certify that on June 28, 2010, a true and correct copy of the foregoing ORDER was deposited in the United States mail or placed in Interdepartmental mailing to be delivered to:

DENVER C. SNUFFER JR.
ROBERT D DAHLE
NELSON SNUFFER DAHLE & POULSEN PC
10885 S STATE ST
SANDY UT 84070

ROSEMOND G BLAKELOCK
ATTORNEY AT LAW
1832 N 1120 W
PROVO UT 84604-1179

Dated this June 28, 2010.
By: Judicial Assistant

Case No. 20080274
District Court No. 004401468